

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS IN SELECTED NATIONAL SCHOOLS IN FOUR STATES IN MALAYSIA¹

Ong Puay Tee
Ong Puay Liu
Sivapalan Selvadurai,
Ong Puay Hoon
Marsitah Mohd Radzi

ABSTRACT

The juxtaposition of education and social mobility is based on the proposition that education plays an important role in mobility. This is particularly true in Malaysia as selection of students into premium classes, boarding schools, universities, for scholarships and for employment is still predominantly based on academic achievement. In an article featured by a national newspaper, the Prime Minister of Malaysia was quoted as saying that one of the government's achievements is in creating an environment of substantial social mobility and that the education system has enabled children to lead better lives than their parents. Is this sentiment, that education increases social mobility vis-à-vis to lead better lives, shared by the direct stakeholders of education, namely the school students? This paper sets out to investigate the perceptions of students in selected national primary and secondary schools in four states in Malaysia. A questionnaire survey consisting of eleven constructs was conducted to elicit responses on whether education allows them to lead better lives. A total of 331 school students in 9 primary schools and 297 school students in 8 secondary schools in Selangor, Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak were randomly selected and surveyed. Findings reveal that there are significant differences in mean scores between rural and urban schools in terms of the role of education in increasing knowledge, expanding potentials, achieving ambition and becoming useful people. Between Sabah and Sarawak with Peninsular Malaysia, significant differences in mean scores are recorded in the constructs that education helps to improve class position, expanding potentials, securing better jobs and achieving ambitions. More interestingly, in a comparison between primary and secondary schools, results reveal that there are significant differences in mean scores on the constructs that education helps to increase knowledge, realize potential, obtain higher salaries, have more comfortable lives, achieve ambition, be loved by family, be loved by teachers and be loved by friends, with primary schools recording higher mean scores in all of these constructs. Does this mean that students become dis-illusioned as they go up the schooling ladder? Implications of results will be discussed.

Keywords: education, social mobility, national schools, Malaysia, academic achievement

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 9th International Malaysian Studies Conference (MSC9), organised by the Malaysian Social Science Association (PSSM), 18-20 August 2014, at Universiti Terengganu Malaysia (UMT), Kuala Trengganu, Terengganu.